

Anderson University School of Theology Doctrinal Dialogue 2008

Response to James Christoph:

A Distinctively Christian Understanding of the Doctrine of Creation

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I'd like to thank Dr. Sebastian for asking me to participate in today's Doctrinal Dialogue and for my introduction. My Ph.D. is in molecular genetics and I have been teaching here at Anderson University in the biology department for eight years. I have just begun a Masters of Theological Studies here at the Seminary, but I've only taken two courses thus far and do not feel at all qualified to respond to, or critique, Dr. Christoph's theology. So, I must respond from my area of expertise and comfort, and that would be from the viewpoint of a scientist and a college professor who deals with the creation/evolution debate frequently.

Most of the discussion of the creation/evolution debate in the popular press involves fairly strident members from both sides of the argument, who insist that you choose between science and faith. Dr. Christoph referred to such a debate on video he watched in preparation for this presentation. That is very typical. This either/or debate has so permeated our society that Dr. Francis Collins, the head of the Human Genome Project, and author of the book *The Language of God* felt it necessary to subtitle his book, *A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*. There is also a quote from the New York Times Book Review on the front cover stating "Collins's argument that science and faith are compatible deserves a wide hearing."¹ I would like to strongly affirm that God and science are compatible. I would also like to state that a

¹ Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God* (New York: Free Press), cover.

variety of interpretations of the Biblical accounts of creation do exist, and some of those interpretations may conflict with science.

In his introduction, Dr. Christoph lists two aims for his inquiry. The first is to consider a “distinctively Christian understanding of creation.”² The second is to “offer a way of treating creation and origins that could be beneficial to the church in general, and specifically to young people as they deal with matters that intersect creation themes in school.”³ This distinctively Christian understanding involves such rich and fruitful concepts as God’s transcendence, the *imago dei*, creation *ex nihilo*, and the Sabbath rest. I have nothing to add to his comments in these areas.

However, in his second point, he wants to “offer a way of treating creations and origins that could be beneficial...to young people as they deal with matters that intersect creation themes in school.”⁴ He makes the point that scripture affirms the WHO but not the HOW of creation. That may work very well in our churches, but it does very little to alleviate the fears of parents who drop their children off at AU to major in science knowing ,or at least suspecting, that we will be teaching them the HOW of creation. Francis Collins, in the aforementioned book, describes what sometimes happens to some, hopefully few, of these students. The definition of one term is important for understanding Collins’ quote. He uses the term “creationism” for what

²James Christoph, “A Distinctively Christian Understanding of the Doctrine of Creation,” Anderson University School of Theology: Doctrinal Dialogue: Papers Presented in 2008, <http://www.anderson.edu/ccl/dialogue.html> [accessed June 17, 2008], 1.

³ James Christoph, “A Distinctively Christian Understanding of the Doctrine of Creation,” 1.

⁴ James Christoph, “A Distinctively Christian Understanding of the Doctrine of Creation,” 1.

we would probably call “literal seven-day creationism” or “young earth creationism.” In chapter eight of the book, entitled “Creationism: When Faith Trumps Science”, Dr. Collins states:

Young people brought up in homes and churches that insist on Creationism sooner or later encounter the overwhelming scientific evidence in favor of an ancient universe and the relatedness of all living things through the process of evolution and natural selection. What a terrible and unnecessary choice they then face! To adhere to the faith of their childhood, they are required to reject a broad and rigorous body of scientific data, effectively committing intellectual suicide. Presented with no other alternative than Creationism, is it any wonder that many of these young people turn away from faith, concluding that they simply cannot believe in a God who would ask them to reject what science has so compellingly taught us about the natural world?⁵

I do not necessarily agree with Dr. Collins’ conclusions that students who have this crisis of faith choose science, but I have seen this crisis of faith in several of my students. I would like to share with you, briefly, the stories of three students who have all taken the same class I team teach with my husband. I have changed their names in order to protect their privacy. And then I would like to borrow two ideas from Dr. Christoph’s paper and add two of my own to enable you to help the students in your church avoid this crisis.

My husband, Dr. Dan Ippolito, teaches the introductory biology course for majors in the freshman year. It is in this course that students, depending upon their high school background and church, may be first introduced to the scientific evidence for evolution. My husband presents a rather formidable presence for freshmen, and if they have a significant crisis of faith, they do not generally share it with him at that time. I do not teach freshmen, and so they do not know me and do not share with me either. However, together we teach a junior/senior seminar class entitled *The Integration of Faith and Science*. We cover several topics in this class, only

⁵ Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God* (New York: Free Press), 177-78.

one of which is origins and the evolution/creation debate. At this point in their careers, these students are familiar with the ideas and they are no longer afraid of either of us. Most are willing to at least discuss with us, if not sometimes argue. We have students read the original literature on both sides of a topic before we discuss it, so we have a point-counterpoint and can do justice to both sides. The book we have them read for the theistic evolution position is *Finding Darwin's God* by Ken Miller. Dr. Miller's basic thesis is that the most rational and theologically sound Christian position on origins has to be theistic evolution.

The first student's name is Laura. The morning of the class meeting when we were to first discuss *Finding Darwin's God*, I came in to find Laura waiting outside my door, crying. I have a couch in my office, plus chocolates and Kleenex, so if you are going to come crying to my office, I'm well equipped. She had the book in her hand. She sat on my couch and said, "I started the book and then couldn't stop. I stayed up all night reading it. If what this guy says is true, then everything my preacher told me is a lie." I spent time with her that day and for many days to come discussing her faith, praying with her, and for her. In her mind, you accepted the entire package, or you rejected it all. But Laura was willing to work through this. She talked to me and to her pastor. She read other books. By the time she graduated, she understood many of the things I'll share in a moment and she could integrate her faith and science.

The other two students did not do as well. The second student's name is Abby. Abby came to class for the discussion of *Finding Darwin's God*, but did not participate. The body language was very hostile. I don't remember now if it was me or my husband who approached her after class and asked to talk. But her response was that the book was wrong and she wasn't reading it. She dropped the class. That was her last semester at AU. Faith and science remained very hostile to each other in Abby's mind.

The third student's name is Kristen. Kristen came to class for discussion, and she did participate. Her participation involved stating, very emphatically, "He's wrong. I don't know why he's wrong, but he's got to be wrong." That was it. When we suggested that she analyze his assumptions, or her assumptions, or just talk to us, she refused. She continued in science, but I expect she will have a very hard way to go. There is no integration in her mind, at least not yet.

Dr. Christoph presents two points in his paper that I think would have benefited these students. I offer them as suggestions that will hopefully benefit future students. The first is his classroom example of the literal interpretation of Genesis 2:2-3. He *gently* guided his students through an exercise that enabled them to see that they were not actually literalists when it came to this passage. Elsewhere, he calls Genesis 1-2:4 a creation hymn⁶ and even states that the "clearly intended meaning"⁷ of the passage is to extol and acknowledge the power of God, not a scientific explanation. I'm afraid it is not so clear to many. We must, pastors and teachers alike, show students why this is a creation hymn; explain Hebrew poetry to them; show them other creation songs in the Bible, other non-literal passages, other passages that they should take literally; teach them to read commentaries; help them to live with a little ambiguity. We must teach them to recognize assumptions in an argument or interpretation and to understand that well-meaning, truly saved people may differ on interpretation! And as an aside--I would be so grateful if someone would do all of that before they come to my science class!

The second point Dr. Christoph brings out is the historical aspects of this topic. For the first fifteen hundred years of Christian history, theologians were not concerned with the how of

⁶ James Christoph, "A Distinctively Christian Understanding of the Doctrine of Creation," 16.

⁷ James Christoph, "A Distinctively Christian Understanding of the Doctrine of Creation," 16.

the creation, the chronology, or the details. They emphasized the WHO. Theirs was a “distinctively Christian understanding of the doctrine of creation.”⁸ Young earth creationism is a recent debate. So have students study the history of the debate and come to understand the social issues that intertwine with it. Have them read about George McCready Price and William Jennings Bryan. And make sure they read Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. In my experience, most people think they know what the book says, but haven’t read it. They don’t know what the book really says but they know they don’t like it. I’ll give you a hint—it is more boring than you can believe!

The third and fourth points are mine. Students should recognize the limits of science. No matter how loudly Richard Dawkins shouts, science has not disproved the existence of God. That is outside the scope of science. I cannot explain prayer to my students scientifically, but I pray with them and I believe in the power of prayer.

And finally, tell students to not be afraid to question. My husband often says that students are afraid to turn over rocks because they are afraid something might come out from under a rock and eat their god. Tell students that their God is far greater than their questions. He is the Creator.

⁸ James Christoph, “A Distinctively Christian Understanding of the Doctrine of Creation,” 1.

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